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Prologue

The coastal region of the South Carolina Lowcountry, bounded on the north by Georgetown and on the south by Port Royal and St. Helena Sound, was the land of the Gullah slave population. Bordering on these coastal lowlands, stretching out into the arms of the sea, halfway between Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia are a fringe of fertile islands. The largest of these islands are Port Royal, Paris, Ladies, Hilton Head, and St. Helena.[1] Here indigo and the once famous long staple cotton were cultivated by the most isolated Gullah slaves, who also created and maintained a distinct, imaginative, and original African-American culture. Because their isolation precluded direct exposure to mass Euro-American influences, Sea Island Gullahs offer evidence of significant combinations of traditional retentions, American acculturation, and intergroup socialization.

The name "Gullah" is generally believed to be a shortened form of Angola. Africans from the Kongo-Angola region, Bantu-speaking peoples, were imported in large numbers during Carolina's early colonial history.[2] As early as 1742, the *South Carolina Gazette* advertised for a runaway slave called "Golla Harry." One of Denmark Vesey's coconspirators, "Gullah Jack," was reportedly born in Angola. An entry of the Charleston City Council for 1822 refers to "Gullah Jack" and his "Gullah or Angola Negroes." The Vesey trial record, however, simply refers to Jack as an African. Winifred Vass, in *The Bantu Speaking Heritage of the United States*, points out that the ruler of the Mbundu nation in Central Africa was called the Ngola, from which the Portuguese named the colony. Vass suggests that this name was used by Europeans to refer to

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175 patterns. These dual occurrences encouraged rapid settlement of the islands south of Charleston, and created labor demands that brought a resurgence of African importations, ushering in the second phase of the Carolina trade.

First was the geographical change of rice-producing areas. In the 1750s inland swamps, which since the 1720s had been utilized for rice cultivation, were gradually deserted in favor of tidal and river swamps. These were better suited for growing rice because soil was more fertile and irrigation was more easily conducted. This discovery opened the remaining coastal frontier to settlement. Workers were not only needed for rice cultivation but also to clear away dense woods and growth prior to planting. Memory of the Stono Rebellion notwithstanding, large-scale use of white labor was never seriously considered. Not only was such labor scarce and expensive, but tidal swamps were infested with malaria-carrying mosquitos, and the summers there were so hot and unhealthy that whites convinced themselves they could not endure such conditions.[12] Rather than relinquish dependency on African workers, South Carolinians altered their ethnic preferences.

The second factor responsible for renewed interest in forced black labor was the cultivation of indigo in the Sea Islands. Great Britain needed large quantities of indigo for its textile industry and encouraged indigo production in the colony. But despite the prospect of a guaranteed market, and even though indigo was found growing in a wild state in Carolina, no commercial possibilities were realized until 1748. The change 175 was precipitated by a young Sea Island woman, Eliza Lucas (later Eliza 249 Lucas Pinckney), who from 1742 to 1744 engaged in a series of experi- [247] ments. She crossbred and developed the plant through seed selection and [386] from a West Indian indigo maker learned the difficult process of properly extracting dye from the plant. Indigo grew well in the Sea Islands and soon became the most favored commodity with the British government. [556] Next to rice, indigo was also the most bountiful source of wealth in the province, laying the foundation for many Sea Island fortunes while further enriching British textile capitalists. Commodity output of rice and indigo during this period of economic advancement was matched by heavy 175 African importation. From 1740 to the eve of the War for Independence, 569 South Carolina imported over 50,000 Africans into the colony.[13] This middle period of the slave trade provided the Sea Island region with numerically dominant African ethnic groups who strongly impacted Gullah religious culture and communal organization.

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While thus exploiting the natural resources of the Island, the settlers raised only provision crops and hogs.

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Although rice culture[4] was begun in South Carolina before 1690 and had become one of the staple commodities by 1724, rice was never raised to any extent on St. Helena Island. Rice culture during the colonial period was confined for the most part to the inland swamps which could be flooded from fresh-water ponds and rivers, as, for example, Combahee River. Salt water is poisonous to the rice plant,[5] and St. Helena Island has only a few small fresh-water ponds. In these few ponds some rice was raised of a different variety from the famous Madagascar rice, but the amount was necessarily small.

INDIGO CULTURE

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Almost from the first settlement of South Carolina, indigo was grown in the province and at intervals a bounty was allowed for its production, but it was not until near the middle of the eighteenth century that it became an important article for exportation.[6] In it St. Helena Island found a staple which supplemented and to some extent supplanted the provision crops and the export of naval stores. As early as 1748 the dye was exported to Eng-

[4] See A. S. Salley, Jr., "The Introduction of Rice Culture into South Carolina," *Bulletins of the Historical Commission of South Carolina*, no. 6. For a discussion of rice culture during the ante-bellum period see Edmund Ruffin, *Report of the Commencement and Progress of the Agricultural Survey of South Carolina for 1843*, and R. F. W. Allston, *Essay on Sea Coast Crops*, which appears also in *De Bow's Review*, XVI, 589-615.

[5] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, p. 469.

[6] In a letter written by Elizabeth (usually abbreviated to Eliza:) Lucas in 1739 she refers to her efforts to produce indigo on her father's plantation in South Carolina. This has led some writers to assert that she first planted indigo in South Carolina and that from her experiments the great indigo industry in the province developed. The records of the province show that some indigo was produced in South Carolina before Miss Lucas was born.

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land and attracted immediate attention, for Great Britain was at that time importing annually 600,000 pounds of indigo from France at the rate of about £150,000 sterling. The following year Parliament allowed a bounty of 6 pence a pound on indigo from the British colonies, and indigo culture at once grew in the favor of South Carolina planters. By 1754 the export from Charles Town had reached 216,924 pounds, and on the eve of the Revolution it had mounted to more than a million and a half pounds.[7]

Indigo had become, next to rice, the most important source of wealth in the province. Moses Lindo, a London Jew and expert indigo sorter, had done more to stimulate the growth and the excellence of the dye than any other man in South Carolina.[8] As surveyor and inspector-general of indigo for South Carolina, he taught the planters to distinguish the grades and to improve the cultivation of the plant and the manufacture of the dye. The prices were usually excellent, ranging generally from 4 to 6 shillings a pound.

A light, dry soil was best suited to indigo culture; hence it was cultivated in considerable quantities on the Sea Islands. During the colonial period both the annual and perennial plants were grown. About 1760 Governor Glen wrote that the plant most frequently used in South Carolina was the annual, the sort generally cultivated in the West Indies.[9] The perennial, however, was less trouble

[7] *Year Book*, City of Charleston, 1883, pp. 402-403.

[8] B. A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina*, chap. III.

[9] "A Description of South Carolina," in Carroll, *Historical Collections*, II, 203. George Milligan, writing in 1763, quotes "an ingenious planter" as saying that there was in the province a great variety of seed, "and from every sort good indigo may be made but none answers so well in this colony as the true Guatimala." Carroll, *op. cit.*, II, 533.

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to grow and thrived on poorer land, provided the soil was dry and loose.

Planting began about the first of April. The soil, after having been well prepared, was furrowed with a drill-plough, or more often with a hoe, two inches deep, and the seed sown thinly in these trenches. A South Carolina planter estimated in 1763 that a bushel of seed would sow four acres.[10] In ten or fifteen days the young plants appeared and were immediately hoed to loosen the earth about them. When the plant was in full bloom, in June or July,[11] it was cut regardless of its height, for at that time the leaves were thick and full of juice.

With the cutting of the weed, the planter was ready to begin the process of manufacturing the dye. The plants were cut off near the ground and placed under water to ferment in a shallow vat, or steeper, as it was called. This process, which usually required some twelve hours, took the dye stuff out of the leaves. The fermenting solution was then drawn from the steeper into another vat, known as the battery, where it was violently agitated with paddles for fifteen or twenty minutes to complete the fermentation and to collect the particles of dye.

As soon as the solution acquired a blue tinge, lime water from the lime vat was carefully stirred into it until a cloudy hue appeared. The indigo water was then beaten again until granulation began and the dye stuff left to precipitate to the bottom of the vat for four or five hours. The water was drawn off and the paste which had settled in the bottom carefully strained through a horse-hair sieve

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 533.

[11] Milligan's authority states that the blooms usually appeared four months from the time of planting.

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to clean it and then hung up in bags for several hours to drain out the water. Afterwards the bags were put through a press to free the indigo from any remaining water and the stiff paste spread on a plank, cut into small pieces about two inches square, and placed in a drying-house so that it might have a free circulation of air without being exposed to the sun which might burn it to a cinder in a few hours. While in the drying-house, the indigo had to be turned carefully three or four times a day until it was sufficiently dried to prevent its being spoiled, and it had to be kept as much as possible from flies. When thoroughly dry, the dye was packed in barrels for market.

The indigo raised in Beaufort District commanded the top price in market,[12] and it was still grown in large quantities even after the Revolution. In 1791, Mrs. Charles Capers, the wife of a St. Helena planter, stated that the planters of the Island were "wholly attentive to the Cultivation of Indigo."[13]

In some sections of the coastal region, especially in Orangeburgh District, indigo was grown throughout the ante-bellum period, and small quantities even after the Civil War. In 1828 William Elliott, of Beaufort District, wrote to the *Southern Agriculturist*, of Charleston, to encourage a more widespread growth of the plant.[14] In defense of his position, he cited the case of Donald B. Jones, of Orangeburgh, a member of the House of Representatives, who, in 1827, employed five hands in the production of cotton and five hands in the production of

[12] Mills, *Statistics of South Carolina*, p. 368.

[13] Mrs. Capers to Mrs. Russell, March 25, 1791. Copy of original in possession of Penn School, St. Helena Island, S. C.

[14] *Southern Agriculturist*, Feb., 1828, pp. 64-66.

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indigo. The five who raised indigo made a net profit of $225 more than the five who cultivated cotton. In 1845 Thomas W. Glover, of Orangeburgh, wrote for the *Report on the Geology of South Carolina* a detailed statement concerning the cultivation and manufacture of indigo.[15] South Carolina indigo was then selling from 40 to 80 cents a pound, and the average production varied from twenty-nine to sixty pounds an acre.

The cultivation of indigo, however, was a precarious undertaking. The soil had to be well prepared before planting; the furrows weeded thoroughly; the caterpillars kept off the plants; the stalks cut with a special kind of hook and handled cautiously in being carried to the vats to prevent the bluish bloom from being rubbed off the leaves; the fermentation closely watched; and the introduction of lime water carefully regulated to produce the best quality of dye. After one had painstakingly watched over his crop from the preparation of the soil to the daily turning of the squares of paste in the drying house, he might even then lose his entire output by its sweating and rotting in the barrels.

Nevertheless, sea-island planters were willing to take the risk as long as Great Britain was paying a bounty, for an acre of virgin land often produced about eighty pounds of good indigo. "One slave may manage Two Acres and upwards," wrote Governor Glen, "and raise Provisions besides, and have all the Winter Months to saw Lumber and be otherwise employed in."[16] Thus the production of

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[15] M. Tuomey, *Report on the Geology of South Carolina*, pp. xxiii-xxiv. A writer in *DeBow's Review* for 1850, (VIII, 495), also urges the cultivation of indigo.

[16] Carroll, *Historical Collections*, II, 204-205.

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indigo on St. Helena Island did not interrupt the manufacture of naval stores which was the first occupation of the settlers. After the indigo crop had been laid by, the slaves were employed in "sawing Lumber and making Hogsheads and other Staves, to supply the Sugar Colonies." Indigo culture fitted in so well with the accustomed regime of the settlers that they continued to raise it despite the uncertain returns.

INTRODUCTION OF SEA-ISLAND COTTON

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The Revolution virtually cut off the market for indigo and, of course, put an end to the British bounty. The steeping vats had for a long time been considered an additional menace to health in this already unhealthy region.[17] At the same time a new staple, sea-island cotton, which offered fabulous profits, began to be raised in the tidewater region. The seed known in Georgia and South Carolina as sea-island cotton came from the Bahama Islands where it had been introduced by the Board of Trade from Anguilla, an island of the Caribbean Sea.

Several Georgia planters experimented with the seed in 1786, among whom were Thomas Spalding and Alexander Bisset whose plants although sturdy did not ripen pods. Two years later, however, Alexander Bisset exported the first bag of sea-island cotton grown in the United States.[18] To the gratified surprise of the Georgia planters, the fruit yielded a finer fiber than that grown in

[17] *Southern Agriculturist*, Feb., 1828. William Elliott, in his article on indigo, states that he will not admit that the steeping vats "impair the health of the country until I can find that our country has become healthier since the Indigo culture has been superseded by that of Cotton. But I readily admit, that the steeping vats must be unpleasant in those sections where the settlements are thick."

[18] Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, *Memoir on the Origin, Cultivation and Uses of Cotton*, pp. 18, 19; *DeBow's Review*, I, 304.